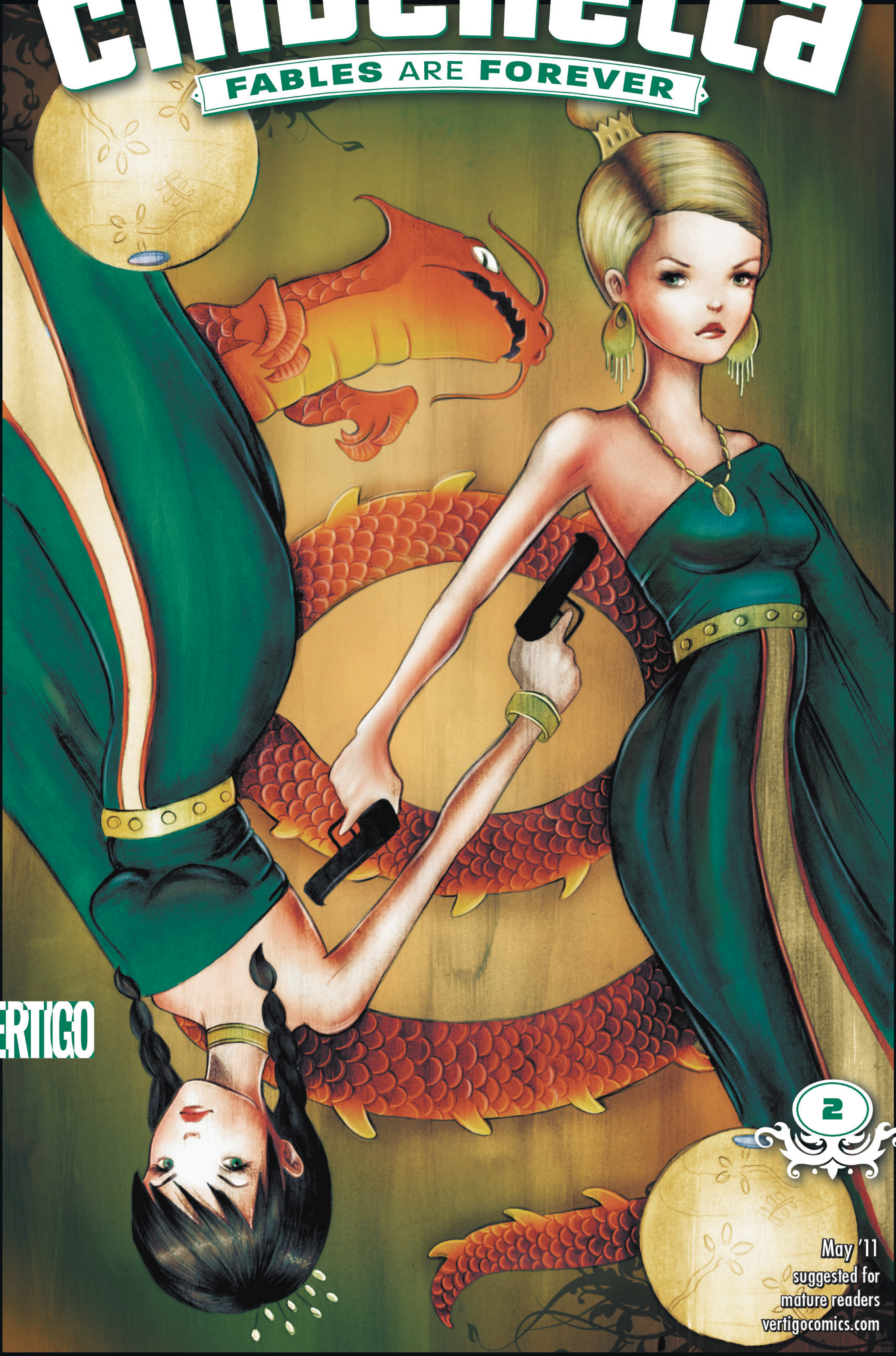
CHRIS
ROBERSON

SHAWN
MCMANUS

CINDERELLA

FABLES ARE FOREVER



VERTIGO

2

May '11
suggested for
mature readers
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New York City, 1943.
THE FIRST TIME I SAW DOROTHY GALE, SHE AND A FEW OF HER FRIENDS HAD JUST MADE IT TO THE MUNDY WORLD.
THEY'D FLED FROM OZ YEARS BEFORE, AHEAD OF THE INVADING ARMIES OF THE ADVERSARY, AND HAD BEEN ON THE RUN EVER SINCE.
WHILE DOROTHY CAME TO FIND A SAFE HAVEN, THE TIN WOODMAN AND THE COWARDLY LION HID OUT ON THE JERSEY PINE BARRENS.
WHEN SHE MADE IT TO FABLETOWN, BIGBY AND SNOW WHITE EXPLAINED ALL ABOUT THE CHARTER AND THE COMMUNITY RULES. AMNESTY, THE WHOLE NINE YARDS.
AND IT WAS STRESSED TO DOROTHY THAT, UNLESS HER FRIENDS COULD AFFORD SUITABLE GLAMOURS TO PASS AS NORMAL HUMANS, THEY WOULD HAVE TO MOVE TO THE FARM.
THE WAY THAT BIGBY AND SNOW TOLD THE STORY, DOROTHY OBJECTED TO **SOMETHING** IN THE STATED TERMS, AND STORMED OFF IN A HUFF.
SNOW THOUGHT IT WAS BECAUSE DOROTHY COULDN'T STAND TO SEE HER FRIENDS CONSIGNED TO THE FARM, BUT BIGBY WASN'T SO SURE.
WHAT IS CERTAIN IS THE FACT THAT DOROTHY GALE STORMED OUT OF FABLETOWN THAT DAY, AND NOBODY THERE EVER SAW HER AGAIN.

NOBODY EXCEPT FOR *ME,* OF COURSE.
Soviet Union, 1983.
DOROTHY, HOW DID YOU END UP...?
I SAID I DIDN'T WANT TO KILL YOU BEFORE WE'D BEEN PROPERLY INTRODUCED. BUT NOW WE'VE *BEEN* INTRODUCED, CINDERELLA, SO...
BLAM!
PING!
OKAY, SO IT'S GOING TO BE LIKE *THAT.*
UNF
SMACK
GNNN.

IT WAS CLEAR RIGHT AWAY THAT DOROTHY WAS A **PROFESSIONAL**. AS IN A PROFESSIONAL **KILLER**. SHE **KNEW** WHAT SHE WAS DOING.
HHH
FORTUNATELY, SO DID **I**.
SMACK
NOT BAD, CINDERELLA. NOT BAD AT ALL.
AND HERE ALL THIS TIME I WAS **SURE** YOU WERE ALL HAT AND NO CATTLE.
WHAT IS THIS? **WHAT** IS **THIS?!**
COME AWAY! THE BUILDING IS COMPROMISED!
TUGARIN, NO! LET THE AMERICAN WOMAN DO HER JOB!
WHO IS THIS WOMAN WHO DARES TO ENTER **MY** HOUSE?!

CINDERELLA

FABLES ARE FOREVER

– PART TWO –

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TUGARIN ZMEYEVICH SHALL TEACH YOU THE *ERROR* OF YOUR *WAYS!*
I WASN'T SURE WHAT I'D FIND WHEN I WENT LOOKING FOR A SECRET "SOVIET FABLETOWN," BUT A FREAKING *DRAGON* WASN'T HIGH ON THE LIST.
OH, CRAP.
HUH?
AND I WASN'T SURE WHAT DOROTHY'S CONNECTION TO THESE JOKERS WAS--
--BUT IT SEEMED THAT SHE WASN'T UP TO SPEED ON THE WHOLE "DRAGON" THING, EITHER.

I WAS DYING TO KNOW WHAT DOROTHY HAD TO DO WITH ALL OF THIS, BUT NOT ENOUGH TO ACTUALLY *DIE* TO KNOW IT.
KRAK!
AND SEEING AS SHE WAS DISTRACTED FOR A MOMENT, I MADE MY MOVE.
TUGARIN ZMEYEVICH SHALL MAKE A *MEAL* OF YOU, DRINK YOUR BLOOD, AND CRUNCH YOUR BONES!
I MANAGED TO GET OUTSIDE BEFORE THE DRAGON GOT HIS TALONS ON ME, BUT JUST *BARELY.*
GANGWAY!
I HADN'T GATHERED MUCH IN THE WAY OF USEFUL INTEL ON THE "SHADOW FABLETOWN," BUT LIKE THE MAN SAID, SOMETIMES DISCRETION IS THE BETTER PART OF VALOR.
THE FIRST TIME I SAW DOROTHY GALE, I'D THOUGHT SHE WAS JUST ANOTHER FABLE ON THE RUN.
AFTER SEEING HER THAT SECOND TIME, I KNEW SHE WAS GOING TO BE *TROUBLE.*

New York City, Now.
I THOUGHT I'D PUT DOROTHY AND THE TROUBLE SHE REPRESENTED FAR BEHIND ME, BUT IT TURNED OUT I WAS WRONG.
SO, IVAN, WHAT ELSE CAN YOU TELL ME ABOUT "SILVERSLIPPER"?
THAT SHE IS DANGEROUS? THAT SHE IS DEADLY? WHAT CAN I TELL YOU THAT YOU DO NOT ALREADY KNOW?
IVAN DURAK CLAIMS THAT DOROTHY GALE IS ALIVE AND WELL, AND HAS BEEN HIRED TO KILL HIM. THE FIRST PART I'M WILLING--RELUCTANTLY--TO BELIEVE. THE SECOND PART? NOT SO MUCH.
IT SEEMS MORE LIKELY THAT IVAN IS WORKING WITH DOROTHY. OR WORKING FOR HER. BUT EVEN IF HE IS, I CAN STILL MAKE USE OF HIM.
YOU CAN TELL ME SOMETHING USEFUL, FOR STARTERS.
I WANT TO KNOW WHERE DOROTHY IS, AND THE QUICKEST WAY TO GET THERE.
:GULP: AND HOW WOULD I KNOW THAT?
COME NOW, IVAN. ALL THOSE JOBS THAT DOROTHY DID BACK IN THE '80s FOR THAT "SHADOW FABLETOWN" OF YOURS? SURELY YOU HAD SOME WAY OF CONTACTING HER?
WELL, CERTAINLY, WE WERE ABLE TO SEND HER ASSIGNMENTS, AS NEEDED, BUT I NEVER...
YOU STAY OUT HERE, THANKS VERY MUCH. A LADY MUST DEFEND HER MODESTY, AFTER ALL.
SO WHAT WAS THE CONTACT PROCEDURE? DEAD DROP? PHONE NUMBER? FACE-TO-FACE?

I DON'T KNOW, I'M SORRY TO SAY.
TUGARIN ALWAYS HANDLED THE COMMUNICATION HIMSELF. AND CONSIDERING HE HAS HIRED HER TO *KILL* ME, I CAN'T IMAGINE HE WILL SHARE THE MEANS WITH US.
COMPARTMENTALIZED INFORMATION. I HAVE TO HAND IT TO THE OLD SOVIETS--BOTH FABLES *AND* MUNDYS--THEY KNEW SECURITY.
BUT I *DO* KNOW THAT THE HEADS OF THE OTHER SOVIET FABLE HOUSES WOULD LIKEWISE CONTRACT DOROTHY'S SERVICE FROM TIME TO TIME...
...AND DID NOT USE TUGARIN AS AN INTERMEDIARY.
NOW WE'RE *GETTING* SOMEWHERE.
SO THESE OTHER SOVIET FABLES--THE HEADS OF THE OTHER "HOUSES"? THEY MUST HAVE HAD THEIR OWN MEANS OF CONTACTING DOROTHY.
WELL, CERTAINLY, BUT...
SO WHAT WE DO NEXT, AS SOON AS I'M *PACKED,* IS GO ASK ONE OF *THEM.*
WE LOST CONTACT WITH SEVERAL OF THE OTHER HOUSES AFTER THE COLLAPSE OF THE SOVIET UNION.
BUT I MAY KNOW HOW TO LOCATE THE FORMER HEAD OF THE CHINESE COMMUNITY.
MENG CHIANG-NU?
YOU KNOW OF HER?
OH, YEAH. WE GO *WAY* BACK.

ONCE I FINISH PACKING THE ESSENTIALS, WE BOOK THE FIRST FLIGHT TO THAILAND, WHICH IS WHERE MADAME MENG STILL LIVES AS FAR AS IVAN KNOWS.
STILL, AFTER ALL THESE YEARS.
COME ON, IVAN. WE DON'T WANT TO MISS OUR FLIGHT.
IT'S BEEN THE BETTER PART OF TWO DECADES SINCE I WAS THERE LAST, BUT I THINK I CAN REMEMBER THE WAY.
I JUST HOPE THIS TRIP DOESN'T WORK OUT THE WAY THE **LAST** ONE DID.

Thailand, 1984.
IT WAS ONLY A FEW MONTHS AFTER MY ABORTIVE MISSION IN THE SOVIET UNION, AND BIGBY HAD DUG UP ANOTHER LEAD ABOUT THE SHADOW FABLETOWN.
NOW WE KNEW WE WEREN'T REALLY LOOKING FOR **ONE** COMMUNITY, BUT LOTS OF LITTLE ONES, AND BIGBY THOUGHT HE'D FOUND ONE OF THEM IN AN ISLAND RESORT OFF THE COAST OF THAILAND.
I WAS PLAYING THE PART OF A SPOILED AMERICAN HEIRESS ON VACATION, LOOKING FOR A LITTLE EXCITEMENT.
MY REAL PURPOSE WAS TO HUNT DOWN BIGBY'S LEAD, BUT I HAD TO MAKE MY COVER CONVINCING, DIDN'T I?

OKAY, SO I SPENT A LITTLE MORE TIME "ESTABLISHING MY COVER" THAN WAS STRICTLY NECESSARY, BUT CAN YOU BLAME ME?
DRINKS ON THE BEACH, MORNING SWIMS IN THE CRYSTAL CLEAR WATERS, **AMAZING** FOOD...
A GIRL'S GOT TO TAKE HER KICKS WHERE SHE FINDS THEM.
BUT EVENTUALLY I KNEW THAT ENOUGH WAS ENOUGH, AND IT WAS TIME TO GET TO **WORK**.
BIGBY'S SOURCE SAID THAT THE LEADER OF ONE OF THE SHADOW FABLETOWN'S COMMUNITIES LIVED IN A SECLUDED SPOT ON THAT ISLAND--
--AND I WAS THERE TO FIND IT.

ISLAND RESORTS ARE ALL WELL AND GOOD, BUT WHEN YOU'RE LAZING ON A BEACH CHAIR WITH A DAIQUIRI IN HAND IT'S ALL TOO EASY TO FORGET SOME SIMPLE TRUTHS.
NAMELY THAT IT'S A **JUNGLE** OUT THERE.
FORTUNATELY, IT DIDN'T TAKE **TOO** LONG TO FIND WHAT I WAS AFTER.
THERE WERE SOME HEAVY DUTY WARDS AND SPELLS AROUND THE PLACE, AS STRONG AS THOSE I'D FOUND IN RUSSIA, BUT THE TRINKETS I'D BORROWED FROM FRAU TOTENKINDER GOT ME RIGHT PAST THEM.
THE IDEA WAS TO PLAY THE "SPOILED HEIRESS" THING TO THE HILT, ACT LIKE I'D GOTTEN LOST IN THE JUNGLE AND JUST WANDERED TO THE PLACE BY ACCIDENT. AFTER THAT, I'D PLAY IT BY EAR.
HELLO? IS ANYBODY HOME? I AM, LIKE, **TOTALLY** LOST, OKAY?

THE PLACE SEEMED LIVED IN, BUT THERE WAS NO SIGN THAT ANYONE HAD BEEN THERE IN DAYS.
I DIDN'T KNOW YET JUST WHO THE HEAD OF THE CHINESE FABLE COMMUNITY WAS, ONLY THAT THIS WAS WHERE THEY LIVED.
AFTER ONE OF THE RUSSIANS TURNED OUT TO BE A DRAGON, I DIDN'T KNOW WHAT TO EXPECT.
BUT WHOEVER I FOUND, I FIGURED THEY WOULD BE TROUBLE, ONE WAY OR ANOTHER.
CINDERELLA, AS I LIVE AND BREATHE.

WHAT A **SURPRISE,** RUNNING INTO YOU HERE.
I WAS EXPECTING TROUBLE, BUT I DIDN'T KNOW THE **HALF** OF IT.

Thailand, Now.
THREE LONG PLANE FLIGHTS AND A TRIP ON A HIRED MOTOR-BOAT LATER, AND I'M BACK AT THAT SAME RESORT.
BUT EVEN IF I HADN'T BEEN HERE BEFORE, I'D KNOW AT A GLANCE THAT IT HAD SEEN BETTER DAYS.
ARE YOU CERTAIN THIS IS THE PLACE?
YEP, THIS IS IT, ALL RIGHT. BUT I DON'T THINK WE'LL HAVE TO WORRY ABOUT YUPPIES CROWDING THE LANAI THIS TIME AROUND.
THE THAI FISHERMAN WE HIRED TO CARRY US OVER FROM THE MAINLAND EXPLAINS THAT THE ISLAND GOT HIT REALLY HARD BY THE LAST BIG TSUNAMI.
MOST OF THE OTHER RESORTS ON THE OTHER ISLANDS WERE REBUILT WITHIN A FEW YEARS, BUT THE OWNERS OF THIS ONE DECIDED TO POCKET THE INSURANCE MONEY AND WALK AWAY.

COME ON, IVAN. WE'RE LOSING DAYLIGHT.
I ONLY EVER SAW MADAME MENG AT COUNCIL MEETINGS, AND NEVER *DREAMED* OF ENTERING HER PERSONAL DEMESNE.
YOU ARE CERTAIN YOU CAN LOCATE HER RESIDENCE?
THE FOLIAGE MAY HAVE SHIFTED AROUND A BIT, BUT THE TERRAIN SHOULD BE ABOUT THE SAME.
IT'S PRETTY CLEAR THAT THERE WON'T BE ANY FRUITY COCKTAILS WITH LITTLE UMBRELLAS IN THEM ON *THIS* TRIP.
IF I SURVIVE THIS BUSINESS WITH DOROTHY, I NEED A *VACATION.* MAYBE SOMEPLACE WHERE *NOTHING* HAPPENS--LIKE *CLEVELAND.*

NO SIGN OF THE WARDS AND SPELLS I ENCOUNTERED LAST TIME. BUT MAYBE THAT MEANS MADAME MENG HAS JUST UPDATED TO SOMETHING MY TRINKETS CAN'T EVEN DETECT.
OKAY, WE'RE HERE.
DOESN'T SEEM AS BADLY HIT AS THE HOTEL.
A BIT RUN-DOWN, BUT STILL LIVABLE.
HELLO? ***HELLO?***
MENG, IF YOU'RE HERE, WE'VE JUST COME TO ***TALK.*** PRETEND WE'RE CARRYING A WHITE FLAG OF ***TRUCE,*** IF YOU WANT.
THERE IS NO NEED TO SHOUT, CHILD.
MY EYES MAY HAVE DIMMED WITH AGE, BUT MY ***EARS*** STILL WORK WELL ENOUGH, THANK YOU VERY MUCH.

MADAME MENG. IT'S BEEN A WHILE.
MENG CHIANG-NU. THE WOMAN WHO SOUGHT HER HUSBAND AND THE GREAT WALL. WENT TO A LOT OF TROUBLE TO GET HER OLD MAN BURIED AFTER HE DIED, AND ENDED UP TURNING INTO A **FISH.**
SHE REFUSED TO GIVE UP WHEN AN EMPEROR AND HIS WHOLE **EMPIRE** TOLD HER "NO," AND SHE DOESN'T SEEM ANY CLOSER TO GIVING UP NOW.
CINDERELLA. AND IVAN DURAK, NO LESS. STRANGE **BEDFELLOWS.**
WE'RE NOT SHARING A BED ANYTIME SOON, THANKS.
SUIT YOURSELF.
YOU SAY YOU WISH TO TALK? THEN LET US NOT TALK IN THE YARD LIKE TRAVELING MERCHANTS OR MENDICANTS SEEKING ALMS, BUT LIKE **CIVILIZED** PEOPLE.

IT DOESN'T LOOK LIKE MENG'S HAD VISITORS IN **YEARS**, BUT INSIDE FIVE MINUTES SHE HAS A WHOLE TEA SERVICE SET UP AND IS POURING OUT CUPS FOR EACH OF US.
BACK WHEN THE SHADOW FABLETOWN WAS A GOING CONCERN, MADAME MENG WAS IN CHARGE OF THEIR **INTELLIGENCE** SERVICES. A NATURAL FOR A HOUSEWIFE WHO USED TO SWAP VILLAGE GOSSIP.
IF THERE'S ANYONE WHO KNOWS THE VALUE OF INFORMATION, IT'S HER.
NOW, WHAT COMPELS YOU TO SEEK OUT AN OLD WOMAN IN HER DOTAGE? WHAT COULD YOU **POSSIBLY** WANT FROM ME?
JUST INFORMATION, MENG. AND WE'RE WILLING TO PAY IN KIND.
SO WHAT IS IT YOU WISH TO KNOW?
IT'S SILVERSLIPPER, MADAME MENG. TUGARIN ZMEYEVICH HAS CONTRACTED HER TO **KILL** ME!
IVAN THINKS YOU USED TO KNOW HOW TO CONTACT DOROTHY GALE, AND WE'RE HOPING YOU STILL DO.
DOROTHY GALE.
THAT IS A NAME I'D HOPED NOT TO HEAR AGAIN IN **THIS** LIFE. SHE WAS LIKE A TOO-SHARP SWORD...USEFUL BUT ALSO PRONE TO CUT THE ONE WHO WIELDS IT.
BUT YES, I KNOW HOW TO LOCATE DOROTHY GALE. ONE NEED ONLY...
OW!
SLAP!

MENG!
URK.
SHE'S DEAD.
WHAT HAPPENED?! SHE WAS JUST TALKING, AND THEN...
I THINK THIS MIGHT HAVE HAD SOMETHING TO DO WITH IT.
THE QUILL LOOKS WICKED, BUT IT ISN'T LIKE ANY WEAPON I'VE EVER SEEN. MORE LIKE SOMETHING THAT WOULD GROW ON A...
LOOK! THERE!
WHAT?

I'VE HEARD ABOUT THESE CRITTERS, BUT DIDN'T REALIZE THERE WERE ANY IN THE MUNDY WORLD.
THE CHISS IS THE SIZE OF A VOLKSWAGEN BUG, AND COVERED IN POISONOUS QUILLS THAT IT CAN SHOOT OUT OF ITS BODY AT WILL.
BUT SO FAR AS I KNEW, THERE WAS ONLY ONE PLACE IN ALL THE WORLDS WHERE THEY COULD BE FOUND.
OZ.
WE ARE DOOMED!
WELL, THIS HAS DOROTHY WRITTEN ALL OVER IT IN BLACK EYELINER!

To Be Continued!